

Planning and Zoning Reform in Massachusetts

The Housing Perspective

- Since the 1980s the rate of housing development in Massachusetts has fallen far below what's needed to support the state's economy and our per capital housing development rate has fallen to 46th of the 50 states
- This supply shortage has caused our housing prices to rise 2-1/2 times faster than the U.S. as a whole since 1980 – a larger increase than any other state
- The combination of high housing prices and insufficient housing supply has resulted in below-average job growth and a net loss of younger college-educated workers to other states.
- We are one of the only states where land use is regulated by cities and towns instead of county or regional government and where local land use regulation need not be consistent with state and regional plans.
- Land use regulation is the single greatest factor that limits housing supply and drives up housing costs in Massachusetts relative to other states.
- Acting in their perceived self-interest, most towns require large building lots and impose other restrictions in order to limit growth and make housing development occur “someplace else”.
- On average more than an acre of land is now required for every new housing unit produced in eastern Massachusetts – the size of a football field.
- Many of the most desirable suburban neighborhoods in Massachusetts could not be built today under current zoning.
- The vast majority of Massachusetts communities have “downzoned” and the amount of land required for each new housing unit is now triple what's required in southern and western states.
- Land use research in Massachusetts and other states shows clearly that large-lot zoning is not simply a response to market demand and that trophy homes on large lots are not what most builders would otherwise build.

- Restrictive local zoning also severely limits production of multifamily housing, such as attached homes, townhouses and apartments, which were commonly allowed in greater Boston through the 1970s.
- Three out of four communities outside of Route 128 did not issue any permits for multifamily housing of 5 or more units during a recent five-year period examined by MIT.
- The percentage of cities and towns in eastern Massachusetts that allow multifamily housing development by right has dropped from 44% in 1972 to 17% in 2004. Less than 1-1/2% of the land area in the region is zoned for multifamily housing development by right.
- The state's smart growth zoning laws (Chapters 40R & 40S) have the potential to increase the amount of land zoned for multifamily housing and higher-density single-family housing as-of-right, but have not yet had a significant impact on local development patterns.
- If we rethink our state land use policies is possible to achieve more housing production, lower housing prices, and preserve more undeveloped land as open space.
- An analysis by economist Edward Moscovitch found that over a ten-year period a smart growth zoning strategy based on an average 1/4 acre per unit would ensure housing price increases no greater than the rate of inflation while reducing development of open space by 50%.



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